1990

Faces on a Bit of Ivory

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by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Language and Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

August, 1990

The thesis of Mary Begley is approved: Date

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Faces on a Bit of Ivory

Seven Short Stories
Submitted as a Master's Thesis

A Daughter's Daughter

"I'm afraid I let the rice get a little dry, Lynnie. I added some more water, but it doesn't look right."

Lyn studied the whitish mass. The added water lay on the top, the rice smelled burnt.

"I'm sorry. I don't manage like I used to." Lyn's mother shook her head, frowning.

When her mother visited, she did most of the cooking. "You're at work all day, it's the least I can do." But she was careful to ask for suggestions, try to cook their favorites. She always said, "I don't want to take over your kitchen."

Her mother had cooked all her life; had always believed the family meal was the most important part of the day. She thinks the family that eats together stays together, Lyn thought to herself. It's a substitute for prayer.

Lyn was a mother; she was used to being mother, though the concept had changed a lot since she'd first been called that. Now Sharon was grown up, but still lived at home. It made sense for her to stay there with Lyn, since her salary was small, and she needed to buy clothes and things. Sometimes Lyn worried about it a little, wondered if her need kept Sharon there. Then she'd worry that it was

Sharon's need. She couldn't decide if it would be worse for Sharon to need her or for her to need Sharon.

She had tried hard to be a good role model; she'd read all the books about child development and codependency and single parenting. The concepts that the books expounded sometimes cancelled each other out. They had rolled around her her head all the years she'd read them. Now, remembering, they were coiled in a heavy mass, a braid of ideas about needing and being needed and then not needing, not being needed any more.

When mother is here, I'm a child too, Lyn thought, staring at the eyes of dishes on her table. I'm the mother when it's just Sharon and me, and then when my mother comes, I'm the child who sets the table rather than cooking; I'm the child who gets to wash and dry the dishes after everybody is through.

And then she was ashamed, and immediately felt angry. It was a formula of emotions that she felt every day when her mother visited.

She resented being a child, she mourned for her mother's lost child, herself, and was angry with her mother for causing her to feel such pity. Her mother had lost her child, lost her strength, lost her place.

I wonder, she thought, if Sharon...She didn't complete the thought. She wondered briefly about the cultures that supposedly revered age and experience...wondered if the

orientals secretly resented their elders. But she did love her mother, she knew she did. And she didn'lt want to take her mother's place, be the oldest, with her thoughts all traced on her face in tiny lines, body sagging on a bent frame.

The three of them, Lyn, her mother, and Sharon, who'd had to work late, shared the meat, the broccoli, the potatoes Lyn had quickly boiled to take the place of the rice, a salad, and dessert.

"Nice meal. You must have cooked, Grandma," Sharon said, smiling. She had complimented everything, Lyn noted, but eaten very little.

"There's nothing like a plain, well-balanced meal," her grandmother said. She smiled back at Sharon. "And carrot salad is so good for you; they used to say it was good for your eyes."

"I've got work to do at the library," Sharon said, carrying her plate to the sink. "I'll see you two later."

When Lyn started gathering the rest of the plates and carrying them toward the sink, her mother turned her chair and sat down heavily. "I'll keep you company," she said.

Lyn washed and rinsed the plates. She put the muffin tin in water to soak and started on the scorched pan the rice had cooked in.

"I believe they don't make pot scrubbers like they used to; you never see the silver colored ones."

"I don't know," Lyn said. "Maybe not."

Now she stared at herself in the window, her reflection projecting back at her, back at the florescent-lighted kitchen, her mother hunched in the chair behind her.

"I guess I just don't understand about Sharon and her masters degree. Do you think she might be meeting somebody, a boy, I mean a young man, at the library?"

"I'm afraid not," Lyn spoke carefully. "I think she's just got to study, needs to do some work." She spoke to her face, saw her reflected lips in the window's blackness. Behind her face her mother's image frowned, shook her head slightly.

"I'd hoped she and that fellow...What was his name?"

"You mean Quentin?"

"Yes, Quentin. I'd hoped..."

Lyn stared at the woodgrain formica backsplash behind her kitchen sink. "He did seem nice, Ma, but I guess he just wasn't right for her."

"A girl needs to be married. I know times have changed, but they haven't changed all that much. I think she's been listening to too much of that old Women's Lib stuff."

Lyn said she didn't think so, but she didn't know.

"Why, I've heard some of those women say some things you wouldn't believe if I told you. It was on one of those TV talk shows, on in the afternoon. One woman said -- well,

I don't believe what she said. Oh, I know there are some bad men out there. Do you think Sharon's afraid she might marry one like that? Do you think she's gotten afraid she can't find a good man?

"She's got good judgement, Ma. She'll do what's right for her."

"She's twenty-eight; at twenty-eight, what's right is what's possible." The older woman laughed at herself a little then.

Lyn turned around to address her mother directly. "Mom, things are a lot different now. Maybe not better, but different. A lot of people don't get married these days...and some of them get married over and over. And some of them live together without getting married. But not everybody thinks they have to get married right off, the way you and I were brought up."

"I know it," her mother said. She shook her head. "Did I tell you about...well, I can't remember her name; her mother was Marie Henderson...Her names's Tina or Tickie, one of those silly names..."

"And Sharon's happy, mom. She goes out a lot, has a lot of good friends. I'm thankful she's not tied up with some loser. She's interested in her classes, her books. She lives the kind of life she wants."

"But is that a life?" Her mother's face, vulnerable now, no longer hidden in its age, twisted. It was a child's

face. She looked about to cry. Lyn could see Sharon's face, her own face as it had looked reflected in the window.

"It's her life, Ma." Lyn turned back around; she grasped the scrubber, attacking the pot again.

"Lynnie, I don't want you to think I don't admire the way you've raised Sharon. She's a good girl...and especially since you've had to do it all by yourself."

Lyn deliberately refused to see Howard's face, that forever youthful, thirty-two year old face that had gone angrily, defiantly in search of its true purpose, gone to California and disappeared, leaving her and Sharon, and an enduring myth in her mother's mind.

"Someday, we'll find out what really happened to Howard," her mother opined. "No good man would've left you like that of his own free will."

"Don't, Mom," she ordered, her voice flat. "Let's talk about something else."

After that, they talked about how heavy all the girls had become who'd graduated from high school with Lyn, those who had stayed in Thomasville, where her mother still lived. "Rose Miller, Rose Ballinger that was, she's a sight." Her mother laughed loudly. "Such arms!"

Lyn worked on the pan patiently, having decided her nails were of little importance. She ground her fingers into the springy pot scrubber, scouring harshly.

But she thought about Sharon, thought about her at the

library, surrounded by books. Sharon's face was so like her grandmother's face, Lyn's mother face used to be, so like the old pictures.

It should be a cozy, safe place, a library...all those books...like being in a box of ideas.

But a box is a box, she thought suddenly, ideas or not.

When she looked down, she realized that her finger was bleeding. She had scoured her own finger in her effort to get all the burned rice. She stared at the red, spreading stain.

Now Lyn fashioned a blonde man. He was a composite of what was left in her brain of how Howard had looked at thirty-two before he left, her dead father, and Ashley Wilkes. He was there in the library to look up something in the reference room, something technical.

The man was dressed the way they used to dress in the fifties. That wouldn't do. She swiftly put jeans and a polo shirt on him. She tried a well-cut blonde beard on his chin, and then took it off. It was a well-chisled, distinctive face; it stood out against the background of dark, upright book spines.

She had him walk over -- it was a strong, decisive stride -- hesitate for a moment, and then tap Sharon on the shoulder as she sat at the brown table in the reference room. Sharon looked up and smiled at him; she had her grandmother's eyes.

Millie had come through it so well, everybody said. Everybody told her how well she had coped, how much they admired her.

"And the other," they'd say. "Millie, the other was just wonderful." The wonderful thing she'd done was to give Toby's liver to a child who needed a transplant.

The donation of the liver had been Walter's idea; it would never have occurred to her. But Walter said it was a comfort to him. And afterward, he'd suggested they go and see the little girl who had received part of Toby, had wanted to talk to her parents. But Millie didn't want to go.

"You go, Walter," she said. "I don't want to hear them talk."

Walter said they should try to stay in contact with the boy who'd driven the car that hit Toby. Millie didn't ever want to see the boy. She told Walter to do as he pleased, but she didn't want to talk to him. Walter said he wanted the boy to know that they didn't blame him. But Millie said she didn't care what the boy thought. Inside, she knew that she did blame him, did begrudge him life, resented the

particular sexual act that had caused his being, wished his parents and grandparents all unborn.

"No," she said. "I don't believe I would have much to say to him."

Millie went back to the library two days after the funeral. She couldn't sit at home any longer looking at mute walls and sightless windows. Her friend Ruth said, "Millie, you're an example to us all, the way you're handling this. Your love for the library, your devotion to your work will save you."

Millie shook her head at that. She wondered why anybody thought her so devoted to, so saved by a few thousand tattered books, rotting in their jackets.

But she went to the library faithfully, going through the motions of her days. She fixed breakfast in the morning, dressed, carefully made up her face, and then went to the library. There, she accepted overdue fines, catalogued books, put books on reserve, and wondered all the time if any of it would ever mean anything to her again.

"You need a new interest, Millie," Walter said. He said it several times. He said he knew she was a strong person, they were both strong people. But at the same time, he said, he worried about her. "We're still young," he'd tell Millie. "We mustn't let this be the end of everything."

In bed, she weas her usual competent self. She took no

precautions to avoid having another child. At thirty-five, she could still have a baby, had plenty of time. But she felt used-up and stale when she thought about it. Whatever the sources are for the tenderness, the wonderment, the willingness to be hurt that constitute motherhood, Millie's sources had dried up.

There was no baby. There were Walter and the library, a few good friends, an occasional movie.

Walter brought the Community College schedule home and left it lying prominently on the coffee table. "It'd do you good to take a class or two," he told her. "It'd take you out of yourself." She said she'd have to think about it.

When she told him she was interested in a computer class, she thought he looked disappointed.

"Of course I'm not disappointed," he insisted. "I'm sort of surprised, though."

He went on to say that he'd thought she might take an exercise class and lose some weight, like a lot of the women in his office did. "Not that you're fat or anything, it just seems like everybody takes exercise classes." Or if she'd chosen a class in Spanish, they could have taken it together, he said.

"Why don't you take the Spanish by yourself?" she suggested. "If that's what you're interested in, you should take the Spanish, while I find out a little more about computers. I can use it at the library."

Walter never did get registered for the Spanish, but he said it was fine that she was going to learn more about computers. "They're the shape of the future," he said. "That's the direction the world is headed in."

She didn't miss a single session of the computer course. She had to work very hard at it, because it was unlike anything she'd ever done. But when the class was over, she missed it. She felt useless, full of empty hours.

Walter urged her to sign up for another course; he suggested the Spanish again. But she said she didn't see anything in the college catalogue that suited her.

What she did next was enroll in the electronics course taught by a maker of computers. They pledged to teach their students who bought kits to construct and do anything they wanted to do with computers, robots, and other technical projects.

By the time the class was over, she'd learned to solder, lay circuts, and to program software. She decided to buy a robot kit. It wasn't a humanoid robot; the picture on the instruction manual was square-looking, mechanistic. What they called its head was hardly more than a flat place on top of the circuitry. But they'd named the thing and advertised it as "Herbot the Robot."

"It'll make a fine hobby for you, Millie," Walter said. He was looking at the robot's pictures in the manual.

"Doesn't look much like the science-fiction robots on

television," Millie said. She wanted to be the one to say it. Together they looked at the sheets of plastic which were to surround the computer, the other shell of panels, flimsy-looking and gray.

Every night after she'd cleaned up the kitchen, Millie worked on Herbot. She'd had the man at the dealership number the boxes in the order in which they should be opened, and she studied the manual harder than she'd ever studied anything before.

Soldering was the main function. It was the most important thing after you'd determined what to join; it was the physical act of creation after the cerebral one. Millie wasn't particularly good with her hands. She had burns in various healing stages all the time she was making Herbot.

The instruction manual called the main part of the robot the torso, although it looked stumpy and utilitarian. And there were openings in the upper portion, the head. It bothered Millie somehow that there were three openings in the head, at the eye level, instead of two. One tiny opening detected changes in light, two larger round holes operated on a sort of sonar, like bats, to locate solid objects. The man where she'd bought him said that Herbot could act as a kind of watchdog, could tell if things moved in the house at night, or if lights were turned on. He said that Herbot could be programmed to speak if he heard loud noises after a certain hour, if she decided that's what

she'd like.

As she soldered and read, went back and reread, resoldered, she tried to plan what to teach him. She felt safe in the house with Walter there; she didn't really need a guard. Herbot could go out and get the mail or pick up the paper if she gave him an arm, provided the mail and the paper were placed in exactly the same spot every day. She thought the mail was a possibility, but she doubted that she could talk the paper boy into such precision. She thought about talking to the paper boy; she'd seen him once when she hadn't been able to sleep all night shortly after Toby's death. He'd been riding a bicycle fast, and he looked cold to her in the half-light of the winter morning.

And then she turned her mind as you would a car, a U-turn in consciousness. She didn't think about the paper boy any more.

Herbot's arm was slow; he had no elbow. He could clasp objects awkwardly after being programmed to do so. He was good at picking up soft, malleable things like pillows that could be wadded up in his grip. She was sure there were more interesting things she could teach him to do with the arm if she got better at programming.

When she finished the arm, she decided to get a voice component. The voice was really the best part. And she could teach him to say anything she chose; the trick would be in getting him to say it at the appropriate time.

When she completed the voice module and added it to Herbot, she read the instructions carefully about the adjustment. Herbot's voice would be robot-like, mechanistic; that much she had no control over. But she could pick out a pitch. She herself could determine whether to make Herbot a tenor, a baritone, or a bass.

When she had adjusted a high, thin voice for him, she had to laugh at the result. It was shrill and piping; it was almost a whistle. No, that would never do. Turning the adjustment carefuly, slowly, she tried out other pitches. She chose a nice, mellow-sounding baritone, and the speed would be moderate. And now that she had created his voice, decided on it once and for all, she didn't plan to adjust it any more unless there was some sort of malfunction. It would be disloyal, or unbelieving, to change the one part of him that was the most expressive.

It was so simple that Millie didn't see why she hadn't thought of it immediately. She taught Herbot to answer the phone. The sound of the bell activated his sound sensor; his short, stiff arm could just reach the phone on the table in the den. And he could turn his three-eyed head and shout in the direction of the receiver. "Hello," she taught him to say. "This is the Robinson residence. Please hold on while I inform someone of your call." And then he would call out, solemnly, carefully, in his baritone, "Walter, Millie, Millie, Walter. Come here, you're wanted on the

phone."

"Millie," her friend Ruth said, "It really does beat all. Why, that robot is so real-sounding, he almost scared me to death. And then I just laughed and laughed. That's the cutest thing I ever heard."

Her friends talked about Herbot every time they saw her. "How are Walter and Herbert -- I mean Herbot?" they'd ask.

Millie was glad that Walter was able to enjoy Herbot when the creature was finally completed. He'd acted sort of left out during the months when she was making him. But now, he told her that he'd bragged to all the people at the office about her and about the robot. He encouraged them to call the house so they could hear the way Herbot answered the phone.

"They all say you must be a remarkable woman," he told Millie. "And I say, yes, she sure is. Remarkable is exactly the right word. She's got that robot doing everything; he's practically human."

She took Herbot in the car with her sometimes when she went to work. She wouldn't have considered taking him into the library. It was just kind of like having a companion while she drove, sitting so straight in the seat beside her, carefully restrained by the seat belt. And she was always careful to lock the car when she left him. Sometimes she worried about it after she got inside and she would go back

out and double check the doors. He looked so funny sitting there on the soft blue upholstery, seat belt still strapped around him, his head orifices blank and waiting. She always left the car window down an inch or so; too much heat might damage him.

One day when it was raining, she rushed out from the library to raise the car window so he wouldn't get wet. When she got there and started to fumble with the key, it was apparent that it had been raining for a while before she noticed. The seat was dark with water. Drops rolled down Herbot's slick gray torso.

She unlocked the door, rushing. Her fingers were too slow, too clumsy. She closed the window and unstrapped Herbot. Sitting in the damp seat, she held him in her lap. Using the bottom of her skirt, she awkwardly tried to wipe him off. Pushing him forward, she hiked up her skirt to reach the top of his squared-off head, where there was a small puddle. She dried him as fast as she could, maniplating her skirt in one hand, her other arm clasped around the robot. She stretched as much of the fabric as possible around and over Herbot. Her panty-hosed legs felt the wet seat; her skirt was a navy blue wad.

When he seemed to be dry, she went over him one more time, rubbing the fragile panels until they looked exactly right. She checked him out as well as she could there in the car. His arm still moved; a light came on in the voice

module, indicating that when the phone rang, his voice would still call to her and to Walter as she had taught him.

The end of Herbot was more sudden than his creation. It was an evening shortly after his wetting. Millie unstrapped the robot from the car and brought him into the house with her. She simply carried him upstairs to the spare room closet, the guest room closet, and pushed him back into a corner. Out-of-season clothing hung down and almost hid him. He looked like a discarded canister vacuum cleaner.

When Walter asked her that night where Herbot was, she said, "I put him upstairs."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I was tired of fooling with him."

"You mean you're not going to let him answer the phone or follow you around the house any more?"

"I don't know." She was studying the tablecloth closely now, holding a fold between her finger and thumb. "He was beginning to be too much to worry with."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"I'm busy and he makes me nervous sometimes," she explained.

"But I thought he was a hobby for you. I thought you liked to have him with you. I thought he was like a pet," Walter said.

"We don't need a pet."

Sometimes Millie would hear Walter go upstairs to the guest bedroom, the spare room where no guest ever came, and open the closet door. She supposed he looked at Herbot.

Millie never went in that room except to dust, or when she was putting away clothes at the end of a season. She never let her eyes go down toward the robot there on the floor, when she opened the closet. She kept them straight ahead, carefully seeing only the limp arms of shirts and dresses.

In Transit

Right after Chuck left, Evelyn thought for a while that she was going to lose her job, and maybe lose her mind. She thought about him all the time, thought about the woman he'd moved in with, thought about things she would like to say to him. She had a lot of imaginary conversations with the woman too, terrible conversations.

"I think you'll have to do something to turn yourself around," the supervisor in her office had told her. "I have a lot of sympathy for what you're going through, but we can't have things like this." The things she meant, Evelyn knew, were lost files, bills not sent, messages undelivered.

For a while after that, she tried to be a sort of android at work, a smiling, nonhuman, nonthinking machine, and a suffering, deserted wife at home. After doing pretty well at the office all day, she would begin to cry as she entered the apartment building where she lived with Johnny and Melissa, her children. By the time she got to the door, the tears would be pouring down her cheeks.

"It's just Mom," she heard Johnny say to his sister one day. "Act I, Scene I, The Tragic Woman Comes Home."

That made her really mad for a while. And then, she began to realize that she was going to lose her children too, if she wasn't careful, lose their respect, their patience, whatever they felt for her. And since she'd lost Chuck, she didn't want to lose anybody else.

That left the bus. She could let herself go, could think and brood and imagine, night and morning, for the forty minutes it took between home and work. But she wouldn't cry; she had too much pride to allow strangers to see the tears.

She tried to keep it all inside her, to keep her face serene. But inside, she was a virago, a bitch, a killer without a weapon, a mind so filled with hate that it sometimes allowed the body it controlled to ride past its stop.

"Rosedale Avenue," the driver would announce in a large voice. She realized that he was a kind man; he didn't announce the other stops, but he'd seen her stumble out of the bus blocks past her corner a couple of times.

When he called out Rosedale, she would gradually turn back into the controlled, well-groomed secretary/mother. "Thank you," she always chanted, as she left the bus. She would try to smile as she walked toward the apartment, would put away the hurt, put away the words.

In the periods of time between work and home, the feeling times, sitting on the bus, she would look at the

women around her. Some of them were better-looking than she; a lot of them looked worse. As she surveyed them, she told herself that they were all managing better than she. They either had a man, or were content without a man. She wasn't sure how she knew that, but she felt that it must be true.

Evelyn went back, mentally, and retraced her marriage. She and Chuck had married in their early twenties. She remembered the wonder with which she used to awaken, in the early months of the marriage, to realize that she wasn't alone in her bed. She recalled, though it hurt her to remember, the care with which she used to examine Chuck's sleeping face in their bed. His maleness, the otherness of him so close beside her...She couldn't allow herself to think about those times for very long.

Johnny had been born three years after their marriage. She could still remember the expression on Chuck's face, the baffled tenderness, when he'd first held his son in his arms. Melissa had been born four years after that.

Now, nineteen years into the marriage, Chuck had walked out, gone to find his destiny with a woman who'd had three husbands, a tiny, blonde anorexic.

That's the way Evelyn thought of her when she got on the bus, sat in her seat, and almost automatically allowed her mind the indulgence of dwelling on her. Her name was Roberta, and Evelyn gloried in the ordinariness of the name.

She was small; Evelyn had only seen her once, but she believed Roberta couldn't be more than five feet tall. That meant she couldn't eat much and still get in her clothes. That's why Evelyn mentally tagged her an anorexic; she must avoid eating, since she was too short to eat and look good.

Whenever a small, blonde woman got on the bus, Evelyn would look at her intently. She would try to imagine her without her clothes. She would estimate her age, her weight. Sometimes she wondered if the woman she saw might be Roberta. Occasionally a woman she was evaluating would look at her nervously. Sometimes the woman would smile. Once a woman said, "Do I know you?"

After that, she tried to watch the blonde women more carefully. She didn't want to give herself away. "I wonder if Roberta ever uses this route, is ever on this bus," she thought.

Sitting there, brooding over the trick that had been played on her, working herself up to the burning, exhausting anger that her thinking always balooned into, she liked to imagine Roberta aging. Mentally, Evelyn aged her the way television time machines age the unwary; she gave her puffy eyes, lines defacing her cheeks and forehead, a body that drooped and obeyed the law of gravity more and more. She made the figure in her head ridiculously tiny at first, then subtly plump, next dimpled with fat, at last a grotesque lump.

Evelyn wondered if Roberta's three husbands had been first-timers or if they all had wives, wives who might be as angry as she. She imagined their forming a club, an organization to hate Roberta, to phone her and annoy her, to send her unattractive things, like those dead flower bouquets she'd read about.

When Chuck told her he was leaving her to live with Roberta, he had said that Roberta sometimes cried, thinking of the pain she must be causing her, Evelyn. He'd said, "That proves she's a beautiful person," and he'd gone on to call her a sensitive, caring human being.

Evelyn had not been able to think of a response to that when he'd said it. Now, on the bus, she gave him replies. "If she's so sensitisve, and she's cried over all the wives she must've hurt, her with those three husbands, she's probably worn out her tear ducts." And sometimes after that, her stomach tense, body rigid, her anger blotting out everything around her, she'd gone on, embroidering her sarcasm, asking if Roberts had a Kleenex franchise, if she'd had her tear ducts surgically lifted, and a lot of other things. In her head, Chuck always stared back at her as though she were a crazy person, or some sort of lower life form.

"Mind if I sit here?" She shook her head and moved her briefcase so that the other woman could sit down.

"Looks like it's going to be another hot one," the

strange woman said. Evelyn didn't answer her. If she talked to all the people on the bus who tried to start conversations, she might as well be at home or at work; she'd have no place to think, no place to be herself. Now the woman was getting out a book. It was Confessions of a Love Addict. Good. That should hold her.

At first, she'd resented the signs that Johnny and Melissa had begun to adjust to Chuck's absence. She'd felt that they had no right to accept the separation; felt betrayed when she realized that they were beginning to get over their first shock. Now, she was glad they were able to get on with their lives, able to be healthy and young and relatively happy. Of course, that wasn't the way she described them when she talked to Chuck in her head, on the bus.

"You've ruined their lives, you know," she would say.

"That's ridiculous," was always his reply.

"They'll never have good marriages themselves, never know what commitment is all about. And they'll forget you, eventually, you and little Roberta. After all, she's not their mother."

When Chuck came to pick up the kids, on alternate Saturdays, Evelyn usually stayed out of sight until they were gone. When it was the reality of Chuck, the man who still wore clothes she'd chosen for him, who blew his nose, who looked exactly as he'd always looked, she didn't have

any words for him after the first few times. It wasn't like talking to him in her head. And she didn't like the way it made her feel to hear the three of them tell her goodbye, see them walk out the door together.

"The older you are, the slower you heal," she thought to herself. She didn't know if that were really true, but it sounded profound. She certainly hadn't healed yet. And her mother, who was twenty years older than she, who'd always loved Chuck, would never get over it.

Her mother had grown up when the divorce rate was about a quarter of what it had gotten to now. "You grew up in a different time, Mom," she'd told her mother. But she knew, in her heart, that her mother thought she had failed because she hadn't tried hard enough.

Sometimes Evelyn would pick out an older woman on the bus and turn her into her mother, talk to her inside her head, tell her all the things she'd done for Chuck, tell her how he'd deceived her.

"I thought things were fine; I thought we'd be celebrating our silver anniversary pretty soon. I was good in bed, damned good," she imagined herself saying to the mother substitute sitting across the aisle from her. "I <u>never</u> said I was too tired. Never had a headache."

"Would you like to look at this magazine?" the older woman was asking her.

"No, thanks." She hoped she hadn't been moving her

mouth, or raising her eyebrows or anything.

When Chuck called and asked if they could talk, she put him off at first. She felt sure he wanted to talk about a divorce; she didn't feel strong enough to talk about it yet.

She hadn't made much of a new, separate life for herself; she'd only been out with two men since Chuck had left. And she hadn't known what to talk to them about. She didn't want to talk about Johnny and Melissa, and she didn't want to tell them the story of the breakup of her marriage. And she didn't have anything else in her head. So both of the men she'd gone out with had told her about his children, showed her the children's pictures; each had told about the breakup of his marriage.

Mostly when men acted interested in her, she tended to avoid them. She wasn't ready to be ingratiating, to act as impressed as she should. She didn't feel like being charming.

Maybe that was what had sent Chuck away from her, into the arms of tiny Roberta. "Maybe I forgot to be impressed; maybe I lost my charm; all those phrases, all the right moves at the right times, the way the game is played."

Before the evening he was finally to come and talk to her, she'd spent a lot of time trying to decide what to

wear, how to look. She'd been letting her hair grow; she liked the way she looked now better than the way she'd looked before Chuck left. At that time, she'd had firm ideas about what was suitable for her role, suitable for a wife and mother of her age, what she could wear and what she couldn't.

Now, she dressed and curled and painted herself for work as though she were creating a mythical doll. She was a figure of indeterminate age, a thin, disciplined woman who could look any way she wanted to look, a woman who only had feelings on the bus, who ate sensibley, who exercised, whose role was ambiguous.

About a half-hour before Chuck was to arrive, in desperation, she put on a teal sweater and did her face. arranged her hair artfully around her face. Then, realizing that he'd be there any minute, she glanced at herself one more time in the mirror. She looked like an aging, hopeful, rejected wife, she realized, all tarted up.

She rushed back into the bathroom and clutched the mass of her hair, pulling it into a ponytail. She scraped it back from her face and used one of Melissa's tortoiseshell clamps to hold it. Taking a tissue, she scrubbed at the pink blush on her cheeks.

"Come in," she said, her voice hard with the anger that threatened to spill out and expose her, expose her as the woman on the bus, the woman with all the words in her head.

She swallowed quickly then and tried to push the anger down, tried to muffle it.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine." She kept her voice flat and small.

Then, against her conscious will, she imagined herself as she had been only that afternoon, coming home on the bus. She'd talked, in her head, to the man across from her, turned him into Chuck, watched him as he'd read his paper.

"I loved you more than anything; I guess I didn't know any better. I didn't learn to do anything else very well," she'd said to the stranger.

"I can't remember a June when it's been this hot this early," Chuck was saying.

"Is it too warm in here?"

"No," he said, "it's fine."

They sat on the couch, in the places where they'd so often sat before. She looked at his pants leg, parallel with her leg, to her left. She avoided his face, trying to give herself a little time.

She tried to remember what she had promised herself she would say to him when he asked for the divorce, and the things she'd promised she wouldn't say.

He was talking about Johnny and Melissa, their grades on their last report cards, Johnny's shoe size. She nodded and made little comments. She could feel her face move, her head nod.

She tried looking at his face a little then, as though he were just another man who'd gotten on the bus. She tried not to hurt herself with really seeing his features, the way he looked.

And now he was saying that Roberta had gone back to her husband. He said he was lonely.

"I need my family again," he said.

"Do you think we have what could make it up to you for losing Roberta?" she had to ask.

"I don't know."

"I don't know either," she heard herself say.

Suddenly a vision of her mother's face came to her. Her mother had brought a hardback dopy of a book called Married Forever the last time she came over. The subtitle was "Back to Eden."

"I saw it in the second-hand book store and I just said to myself, Evelyn would like that book."

"I thought maybe we could try -- if you wanted to," he said.

Then she told him she would talk to her therapist and let him know.

After he was gone, she tried to imagine a man's face, a knowing, therapeutic face.

"I don't know if I can stand it," she told the face. "I don't know how to act with him."

"How would you like to act?" the face asked, just like the psychiatrists she'd seen on television.

"I'd like to take a pill and have us both forget the last year and a half. I'd like to erase it. I don't know how to live around it, as if it hadn't happened."

"Do you love your husband?" the face asked implacably.

"Not very much," the woman in her head confessed.

And suddenly she recognized the therapist/man to whom she was speaking. It was the bus driver.

"I don't know if I could go back to living...not being careful...to living all day long."

"Romance is not always easy to summon," the therapist-voice proclaimed. Incredibly, he wore his bus driver's hat now.

"I don't want romance," she protested. This driver, this man in her head, didn't understand her any better than any of the real people she knew. "I don't want romance; I just want self-respect."

"Is self-respect more important than security, more important than the chance for the stability of your family, more important than your children's futures?"

"I don't know," she told the man's face. Then, she switched him off in her head. She didn't like to look at him. She didn't like his choices.

When she went back in the bedroom, she took the clamp off her hair and let it fall around her face again. Looking back toward the door to the hall, the way to the living room, where Chuck and the bus driver had been, she made her face smooth and anonymous and secret.

Evelyn tried to imagine her days without the times, morning and evening, when she went inside her hate, stroked it, loving it. She tried to think of herself as she used to be, coming home from work, tried to imagine getting on the bus full of ideas about food to be cooked, funny things to be said.

Trying to see herself that way made her afraid. She could hardly imagine herself when she'd been like the other people on the bus, before she had filled herself up with things she couldn't say out loud.

"I don't know," she said. She could see all their faces again, even here in the bedroom, all the too-thin Robertas, her mother, Johnny and Melissa, the bus driver, Chuck. They made a crowd; there was hardly any room for her to move.

"I'll talk to you on the bus," she said, "like always, tomorrow."

Goldengrove

Eyes closed, she let the impersonal sun cover her. Grateful for the darkness, she revelled in the warmth, the anonymous wealth of comfort.

"Poor old thing. Wonder if she's sick or something, with her eyes closed like that."

"Shh, she'll hear you. It's none of your business."

"That's the trouble with you, you think the rest of the world can take care of itself, you don't want to help people."

"Go away," the woman said, in a pleasant voice. She wasn't really angry, but she didn't have time for them. The sun wouldn't be like this for long. They could probably find something else to argue over.

Alone again, she reclosed her eyes and examined the black, brown, gold warmth of the insides of her lids. She carefully detached herself from that reality and willed herself not to nap.

Slowly, carefully, it came. She could see the house

clearly now. The white paint was crisp, the porch floor was a gray contrast. She saw herself and then went inside herself, the girl leaning against the porch railing. She had long, brown hair, a mane of hair that curled in spite of everything, curled as though it was possessed.

The girl stretched in the sun; the warmth, the light curved around her in a frame of comfort. The girl's face, her own face, was a picture dimly remembered, barely recognized. The light was more real than the face.

The girl moved to go in the house now, walked through the rooms, spoke to the woman in the kitchen. She stooped to pet a dog whose nose inquired against her ankle.

"Jim phoned about half an hour ago," the woman volunteered. She was making a cake, concentrating on evening up the two pans, getting the layers equal. "That boy's pretty interested in you, I guess." She was putting the two cake pans in the oven now, her back to the girl.

"I don't know," the girl, the woman's daughter said. She had a little smile, a hidden, self-conscious smile on her lips.

"He seems like a nice boy," the woman ventured. She spoke slowly, as though she were being careful of her words. "I was wondering if you liked him too."

"Oh, I don't know. He's pretty nice, I guess. But I don't know."

And then she went upstairs to her room, a room with pale

blue walls and old, mismatched furniture, a beautiful room filled with light.

She took a dress out of the closet, a full-skirted, small-waisted rose colored dress. Lying across the straight lines of the dark chair, the dress looked frail and insubstantial.

The phone rang now, a familiar, urgent echo of itself. She smiled as she ran to the hall to answer it.

"Yes," she said. "Yes...yes." Then she laughed. "Yes," she whispered, "I'll be ready."

Moving quickly, she went into the small bathroom. She took her clothing off, took shampoo from the shelf and began to wash her long hair in the basin. There was such a lot of it, she had to twist and maneuver to emerse it all. A few drops of water from the dripping tendrils of hair ran down her arms and back. Then she carefully rinsed twice. She tested a long strand of hair from the back to see if the shampoo was gone. She tried another bit from the top, listening carefully to be sure.

Then, wet twists of hair clinging to her shoulders, she moved to the white tub. She ran the water up high, testing it with her fingers to be sure the temperature was just right. Watching the tub fill, she shivered as air touched her damp back.

Lying in the warm envelope of water, she ran her hands down her hips, feeling the smoothness. She extended her

slim, cleanshaven legs, first one and then the other. Now she ran her hands over the silky surfaces. Moving quickly, she washed herself; the flowery smell of the soap added an extravagance to her cleanness.

She forced herself out of the seductive warmth of the tub and reached for a thin white towel. She dried her body, then rubbed her still damp hair. Taking a second oblong of white, she wrapped it around her head.

Back in the blue room, she looked at her face in the mirror of the scratched dresser. Her face looked back nakedly, boldly, now free of the hair hidden by the worn white towel. Her face was sure, unafraid, safe behind itself.

She felt her hair now; it was almost dry. She carefully chose from the dresser the prettiest slip, the laciest panties, the sheerest bra. She pulled smooth hose from the drawer. She placed them on her clean body, now in a frenzy to hurry. She'd waited all day; suddenly she could wait no longer.

Now the dress, the prettiests dress, the rosy, shining mythical dress.

With a brush, she subdued her hair, shaping it, curbing it, teaching it. Now...now...she slid it around her face, making a frame for her look, for her eyes, for her mouth which smiled.

"Goodbye," she called to her mother as she ran down the

stairs. "Goodbye."

She opened her eyes and pulled herself erect. She reached for the walker leaning on the park bench. Her feet, in the shoes with the hurting places cut out, shuffled a little in the leaves. She stopped for a moment to get her breath. Then feeling the folds of the pink dress against her, the weight of the wild, shining hair on her back, she walked down the path toward the bus stop.

Gulf Coast

"I feel sorry for women who can't adjust to their years," Frances Wheeler liked to say. She prided herself on her own adjustment.

"I stick to the things that suit me," she would tell salesclerks who tried to tempt her with peach-colored ruffles and the lacey extravangances that she had put firmly behind her.

She felt sorry for those women on the beach in the resort community where she lived who, despite being of her generation, persisted in manipulating their soft, pliable flesh into bikinis and exposing themselves on the sand. Their plumpness gradually dried and stretched and parched. They became like discarded husks, abandoned on the shell-crusted verges.

"Build me more stately mansions," she would recite to herself as she viewed the hulks among the seaweed. She felt superior to their efforts; she knew herself, knew the difference between past and present.

Frances wore the colors she'd been color-coded to wear, refused to dye her hair. And she tried never to fall prey

to her occasional taste for whimsy.

Following her husband's death, she'd purchased a comfortable condominium with off-white walls; she furnished it with sand-colored furniture. Then she went back to college. She got a degree in anthropology, and then because it was closely allied, didn't require too many more hours, got another degree in sociology.

When people said, "What are you doing these days?" Frances was able to say, "Oh, I'm always busy. I'm a student."

People invariably said how much they admired her. A student seemed to be the most respectable thing you could be, particularly if there were no possibility of your using the knowledge in any sort of vulgar, profitable way.

Charlie, her nephew, was also a long-time student. He had at least one degree, and was always taking classes. So far as Frances knew, he had no plans for leaving school or entering the permanent work force. She didn't think it was any of her business whether he ever worked full-time or not; if he could manage his life to suit himself, more power to him.

Charlie and a few of his friends sometimes came to her condo to play cards. She felt pretty sure that her brother, Bert, and his wife, that silly Allene, had not made the fellows feel welcome to come to their house and play cards. She provided the beer and even played some herself. She

never lost more than fifty dollars on a weekend, and she enjoyed the company.

"Of all your friends, I like Mark the best," she commented to Charlie one Sunday when he'd come over to let her take him to brunch. "He seems quiet and serious."

"Yeah, he's a good follow, a good friend. But I'll bet you like him because of his looks." Charlie laughed then; she laughed too. Mark was good-looking, in a sort of brooding, Heathcliffean way. He wore nice clothes, traditionally cut, and she suspected that he had a permanent.

Sometimes Mark came with Charlie and they'd all go out for a Sunday meal. Occasionally they went to a concert or a lecture sponsored by the college. Sometimes she went with both of them, sometimes just Charlie, or just Mark.

"You don't look well, Mark. In fact, you look terrible." She felt almost as close to Mark as she did to Charlie, close enough to say just about anything.

"Things aren't going too well at home." He said it with a kind of dignity. She respected him for not saying too much, not whining, not telling her all the details. She already knew, from Charlie, that Mark's father was in a VA hospital, that his mother drank. Charlie said the mother treated Mark, who was twenty-seven, as though he were a child. Charlie said she was always trying to keep track of where he was going, what he did.

Frances thought about how foolish most parents are, how little they bother to understand their children. She'd never had a child, but she felt sure she'd have been capable of being a superior mother.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

The very next week, Charlie, apologetic and stumbling over his words, had asked his aunt if his friend could stay with her for a little while, till things got straightened out at home. She'd had to restrain herself from finishing his sentences, saying the words before they came out of his mouth, it was so obvious what he was trying to ask.

After he'd finished his badly put, almost incoherent plea, she'd said, "Of course, Charlie. A friend of yours is a friend of mine. And after all, what are friends for?"

Secretly, she was afraid. She hadn't lived with anybody around her since her husband had died. She dreaded sharing the details of her existence with another person.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried. Mark worked in a book store during the day; they saw almost nothing of each other until evening. And a lot of evenings she had classes or went to the library. So their relationship had the comfort of being loose, nonconfining. The almost white condo was large enough to give them both a measure of privacy, and the boy was intelligent enough to try not to inconvenience her. Once or twice he cooked for the two of them on a Sunday night, and she was charmed by the

interesting, exotic things he served her.

When she went to an occasional movie, it was only polite to ask if Mark would like to go. And sometimes he did go; sometimes he was busy.

Her friends began to invite the two of them to dinner. Some of them seemed to think Mark was her nephew, was Charlie. They'd say, "Bring your young man, your -- what's his name, that fellow..." And she would say, "I'll see if one of my boys is free that night."

They were no longer boys, but that's what she called them. In her head, they were poised conveniently on the cusp between youth and maturity; when she needed distance between herself and their perceived existences, she could image them as almost adolescents, innocents. When she needed to think of herself as a woman with men friends, escorts, she could instantly add the necessary years.

Frances wasn't sure when she became aware that Mark saw a lot of Charlie away from the condo. She had always known they were friends, of course. But now when the two of them were together she was gradually aware of connections both referred to and unspoken.

Eventually she let her mind enunciate to itself the obvious fact that Mark and Charlie must be lovers. By the time she allowed the knowledge to form itself in her mind, she had prepared her consciousness not to mind too much. She had cushioned the awareness till it almost fit the place

she'd made for it.

"I hope I'm not like some people my age when it comes to young people," she would say to herself. Of course Charlie and Mark weren't particularly young, and their situation wasn't exclusive to youth, but in her thoughts they were as young as she wanted them to be, and their relationship could be veneered with her acceptance of the vagaries of youth, her tolerance for rebelliousness, her contempt for the harsh over-reactions of most people her age.

She realized that it was a convenient thing for Mark to be seen with a woman, even a woman old enough to be his mother. The realization was more pleasant than painful. She hoped she hadn't lost her sense of humor.

Mark had never paid any rent for his part of her home. She'd have refused if he asked. Once he referred to her generosity and she was embarrassed. "Oh, don't talk like that," she said.

After Charlie's death in a sailing accident, Mark and Frances were closer than ever. She attended her nephew's funeral with Mark; she felt like a protector, a partner in his sorrow. Her triumph in being, she felt, a more sincere mourner than Allene, the victim's mother, was tinged by a feeling of rebellion against the familiar forms, the tired, worn words.

Sitting with Mark, in the second pew, at an angle, she looked at the side of her brother's bent head, neck wattled and vulnerable. He looked, she suddenly realized, as their father used to look. Too, there was a look of Charlie about him...and of, yes, of herself.

All at once, she felt that she could hardly breathe. She needed to get away, away from the words, the figures, her brother, even away from Mark. But she realized that she couldn't leave Charlie's friend, her friend, by himself.

"He just never came up," Mark told Frances. "I never saw him again after we tipped."

Mark would get tears in his eyes when he tried to talk to Frances about Charlie's death.

"Hush," she would say to him, as though he were a child. "Hush, don't think about it any more."

Poor Charlie would never have thin, old legs beneath his bathing suit. He'd never be a birdlike old man, searching for shells, or for something, anything, out on the beach.

They were comfortable together, each respecting the other's uniqueness. Sometimes Frances had fantasies about what other people thought. She knew what her brother, Charlie's father, thought. "Old fool," he'd called her. Well, let him. At least she hadn't ossified herself into the kind of conformity that had deadened most of her contemporaries.

Sometimes she caught one of the other women in the

building looking at her with what appeared to be a speculative expression. "Nosey, tacky old thing," she murmurred at such times. She felt sure the women, most of whose husbands were past sixty, were all jealous of her, curious about her.

Now, with Charlie gone, Frances and Mark ate most of their meals together. He cooked more often than she did. They always did their grocery shopping together. It was a Tuesday night ritual. She wrote the grocery check with a flourish and a smile for the silly little thing at the cash register.

"I'm going to fix it so that what would have been Charlie's will be yours," she told him one Sunday morning while they were sharing the paper. He didn't say anything. She thought she saw him wipe his eyes surreptitiously. She was pleased by his silence.

Frances had begun to allow herself a few touches of lace, a few becoming colors. She had softened her image to include a man's presence, to admit that she had at least been a woman at one time. Only in the matter of beachwear was she as spartan as ever. Mark urged her to get some variety, but she never did.

The day they went sailing, she wore a severe black suit without a tuck or a flounce on it. She liked herself for wearing it, liked the image of herself, in her plain, no-nonsense black suit, going for a sail with a strong, young

man. She was smiling to herself as they walked by the burnt-out offerings wearing ruffles or flowers, basted with libations of oil. I'm glad, she thought to herself, I've always known the difference between past and present, always known what I was about.

A Dress from the Junior Department

A young salesperson with perfume samples tried to spray the woman's wrist. "No, no," she said, backing away.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" the man asked. "It doesn't look right to me."

They moved slowly through the Junior Department, past racks of tee shirts with spotted leopards croching on the breasts, down aisles of jeans, and abbreviated bathing suits. The piped-in music was cheerful and loud. The words, if they were words, didn't come through clearly.

"We've always shopped in the Girls Department, but I promised her she could get some of her things in this department after her birthday," the woman said. Her face was a pale as that of the mannequin beside her.

"Can I help you?" The clerk was young; her voice and her face smiled in a practiced way. She wore eye shadow and had a face pinker than the walls of the junior department. Her hair stood up sharply on top.

"Yes, we're looking for a nice dress."

"We have some real popular things over here." She led them toward a rack of dresses against the wall. They went past a rack of neon green and orange shorts and shirts.

"Who is it for? I mean....."

"Our daughter," the man said. His hand was holding the woman's. Now he was looking at the merchandise tacked up over the wall racks, above eye level. There were Hawaiian type shirts, full skirts, tasselled, many-colored belts.

"I'm a summer," a loud, young voice said from the other side of a rack of skirts to their left. "And I could just die. I always want to wear yellow, but it don't, you know, bring me out."

"We'd like a dress, like a dress to wear to church."

"How about something like this?" The clerk spoke loudly to make her voice carry over the music and the other noises. The dress she pulled off the rack was a deep magenta, had a peasant style neck. "This color is good on anybody."

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind...She's young."

"What size do you need?"

"She's almost as tall as me, but thin." The woman turned away after she said that, faced out toward the main aisle.

"How old is she?"

The man cleared his throat. "Her birthday was Tuesday. She was twelve."

"Let's try a size 5," the girl said, running her hands across the rack. "We have 3's too, of course. But I expect she can wear a 5, if she's that tall."

"Something pretty," the woman said. She'd turned back around. She reached into the rack and brought out a pink dress with a pattern of flowers. "This is pretty, but I'd rather have a solid color, and sleeves."

"Here's a nice one," the girl said. "This is a 9, but we have it in other sizes. This'd be good for almost anything. I don't know exactly what you have in mind...but this is silk, really nice."

"Wedgewood blue," the woman said. She touched the dress, ran her fingers over the tucks in the oval yoke benath the small collar.

"It's kind of an old-fashioned dress," the girl said. "These styles are coming back."

"She....I wouldn't like it to be out of style," the woman murmured.

"Oh, this is very popular. It's just that it's not a casual dress. This would be perfect for a special occasion, like a wedding or a nice party. Is she going to a wedding?"

"No," the man said.

"Do you have this one in a 5?" The mother was fondling the silk, staring at the blue dress.

"Here it is," the girl chirped. "And I can almost guarantee she'll like it. It has such a lady-like look. And anybody would like a nice silk like this. If she should need the 7, we have it in a 7. Is she, you know, developed for her age?" She glanced at the father. He was looking at

his wife.

"No, not very." The woman looked tired. "I think the 5 will be big enough."

They followed her to the register. The music was different now; the voices came through more distinctly. "Do you dare, do you dare, do you dare to love?" the voices asked.

Taking the charge card, the clerk's eyes followed the man's gaze to a rack of earrings. Tiny, bright-colored parrots were suspended on dangling bits of chain.

"How about some earrings to perk the outfit up? These are darling. Sh'd love these."

The man said nothing, just looked at the display.

"She never had her ears pierced," the woman said. Her face worked now, was twisted. She turned her head, looking back toward the bright racks of clothing.

"Well, they do it free with a purchase. That'd be a nice surprise. You say her birthday was last week? You could get her some earrings for pierced ears and put on a card -- maybe a belated birthday card, that'd be cute -- you could put on a card that she can have her ears pierced." The girl's voice was young, enticing. "See, the birds've got some of the blue like the dress on them."

"Just the dress. No earrings today." The man sounded firm, though his voice was small now.

The girl with the spikey hair looked at the woman; the

pink face stilled for a moment.

"O.K., I'll just ring this up."

The two of them watched her punch the numbers into the computerized cash register.

"I'm glad it's a silk dress," the woman said softly to her husband. "She never had anything silk."

"Thank you for shopping with us." The girl's voice was a little tentative. Then she spoke quickly, letting the words spill over each other in a rush. "It really is a pretty dress; it's a nice dress, nice enough for anything."

They took the bag and thanked her. Just before he turned to go, the man reached over to touch one of the parrot earrings.

The Fortuneteller

It's a new technique," the woman said. "We can see more this way. It's better than just looking at the raw palm of your hand. We have to keep up with things. We try to combine the best of the old ways with modern science."

The large woman, enclosed in a loose, plum-colored garment had coated June's hand in something sticky and blue, then instructed her to apply her hand to a plexiglass panel. "Lay it right there, honey," she'd commanded. "Firm, make it as flat as you can." She spoke with authority; her movements and gestures were those of someone used to commanding respect.

Surely that's a wig, June thought. The woman's long, glossy hair was too perfect to be real. I'm not going to tell her anything. She will just have to make the whole thing up, with no help from me.

Following instructions, she carefully lifted her coated hand from the clear, cold panel. Then the woman held the plastic up between herself and the light, squinting her eyes as she examined the results. The smears from June's hand, the pattern of lines and shapes cast a blue reflection across the intent face.

Watching, June felt a stab of fear. What if she says

I'm going to die, or that there'll be a divorce?

June didn't really believe in this palm reader. But she was here for a purpose. The purpose was hazy in her mind. It was as imprecise to her as the images on and beyond the plexiglass, the woman's face, grotesque behind the blue blob that was the impression of June's hand.

"I see a great deal of sensitivity," the woman said.

"Yes," June murmurred, relieved. And she caught herself nodding her agreement. She hadn't meant to do that. She knew how these people operated. Her stomach muscles were tense, her hands cold. She forced herself to try to relax. She lowered her shoulders and took a deep breath. There was a sweet odor in the house, maybe potpourri, overlaying a faint smell of cats.

"Yes, you are sometimes hurt, but you keep it to yourself. You don't complain; you hold it inside."

June sat perfectly still, held her face blank.

"There is a new beginning. You can see it here." The woman pointed to a line that appeared to intersect another on the blue smear. "The direction is positive."

A new beginning, June thought, positive. Still she said nothing. She crossed her feet, then uncrossed them. The silence and the smell, or something, made her suddenly feel sick at her stomach. She swallowed hard and concentrated on the broad face across from her, the seer looking at the image of her hand.

The woman had given her a damp cloth to wipe the blue off, but she could still see a smear of color in a crease on her hand. She tried to wipe it with her other palm.

"You haven't worried about money very much in the past," the woman said. Now she was frowning, turning the plexiglass pane, looking at it from another angle.

She probably watched me drive up, June thought. She's no amateur. Probably pegged me as soon as she saw me. And clothes, she could probably price every stitch I have on.

"You've overspent lately," the woman went on. "Sometimes you feel guilty about it. But when you feel depressed, the part of you that doesn't like to worry, that likes to spend, makes you feel better temporarily by getting something new."

"With the new direction," the woman pointed again to the small intersection, the crease in the blue gum, "with this, you'll feel a need to reassess your finances and your lifestyle. Maybe you'll remodel or move."

June felt a tiny spring of elation in spite of herself.

"Your health is good," the woman continued, speaking slowly, as though she were trying to draw out what she said as long as she could. "Sometimes you have fears about your health and the health of those you love, but generally there is good health shown in your hand."

June wondered if she could leave now; this was enough.

"The most impressive thing about your hand is the

strength it discloses. There is sensitivity and strength, an unusual combination. A good combination."

June clenched her hands together. She wanted to leave now, before the woman said something that would spoil it.

She had sat stiffly in Dr. Springmeyer's chair earlier that day. He had finally come out with it, finally challenged her. And he'd waited until after it was done, until the thing was, she hoped, accomplished.

"I'd like Mr. Anderson to come in with you and let me talk to you both together. I'd like to be sure that he knows and understands everything," he'd said, smooth as silk. He was truly a rogue. "I am satisfied with your assurances of his cooperation." He'd looked at her hard. "We have his signature on all the necessary documents, the nonliability clause, the financial agreement, and so on." He'd paused then, a pause that seemed like forever to her. "But it's usually considered proper to have an interview with him. It's better from the point of view of mental hygiene."

The old pirate. Nobody had used the term mental hygiene for twenty-five years. He'd taken the money. He'd seen the report from Ron's doctor, knew about the sperm count; he'd known exactly what was what. She would have to deal with him in language that told him she understood, that she wouldn't be manipulated, wouldn't be blackmailed.

"My husband signed the papers and he fully approves," she said. She had, of course, forged Ron's name on all of them. "We are very happy about this, or we will be when and if it works. If his signature wasn't enough, you should have said so before today, said so before the...the procedure." She hated herself for the slight hesitation, hated herself for gesturing. She gripped her hands together again. She forced herself to speak calmly, deliberately.

"I've done everything you asked, and I've paid you for it." She paused then, waiting to see if he would speak. The old rascal was silent for the moment. She felt a surge of power as she looked at him.

She'd known he would do it. He gave out too many tranquillizers, too many careless prescriptions. She'd done her homework. She knew that lots of silly women thought he was the most understanding man they'd ever met. He was greedy, and he liked to play God. She knew she'd chosen the right man.

"It may seem ridiculous." She smiled at him, and then mentally cursed herself for the effort to be winning. "It may seem ridiculous, but we've agreed to try and forget that the baby isn't his. After today, now that it's been done, we're not going to mention that this procedure was ever performed."

"But of course you may have to return. I can't guarantee that you'll conceive immediately."

"I understand," she said. "And if I do come back, I'll keep coming back until I'm pregnant. But my husband and I are not talking about it any more. We're not ever going to mention artificial insemination to each other again. From today on, we are both thinking of it as his baby that I'm carrying. If I have to come back, I'll come alone. And he and I won't talk about it. And he doesn't want to talk to you about it."

"Well, of course," he cleared his throat to gain a little time. "Of course it's a healthy thing that you both accept responsibility for the baby. And I'm sure that eventually you'll have a beautiful child. There's no physical reason why you shouldn't be able to conceive. And the donors are all healthy, young medical students, carefully screened, free from disease...bright...genetically sound...."

He ran out of words for a moment and pondered the artificial uterous displayed on the front corner of his desk.

"But I'd still like to talk to him about it." He looked at her directly again, with all the authority the room, the desk, the diplomas could give him.

She stood now, in her best suit. "Dr. Springmeyer," she said, and she fought for the dignity that she'd folded up with her clothing back in the white, antiseptic consulting cubicle. "If I ever find that you've spoken to my husband, or that you've hinted to anybody that this isn't

his baby, I'll see that you lose your license."

He looked as hurt as a lover accused of cheating. The old thief. He'd known all along that she wasn't telling Ron. He'd gone along with her request that the insemination be done without a nurse present, had promised not to make it a part of her record. And while he'd bent over her, with her feet in those damned stirrups, he'd talked about vacations and diets as comfortingly as though she'd been getting an annual pap smear.

Now the woman was telling her that she sometimes got bored and felt a need for change. Poor thing, she must be running out of things to say.

"Is that all you see?" She was ready to leave now, suddenly exhausted. The mental preparation to go the doctor's office, going through with the thing itself, the anger and fear at the man afterwards, they had all gone out of her. The emotions had carried her through it, brought her to this place. And then they left her. Left her all used up.

"There will be some worries in the summer," the woman warned. "But nothing serious." She had harsh lines beneath her eyes and around her nose, down to her mouth. The makeup there was in ridges, lying alien on her skin, like the touch of blue that adhered stubbornly to June's hand.

June felt a rush of something like love for the

young-old face framed by the great mass of perfect, reddish hair.

Now she thanked the woman and paid her. She paid her just what she asked. Better not call attention to herself by giving her more. She felt lighter now. Part of her plan, her list for the day was completed. Just one more item, one more bead to string.

She waited till dinner was over, until he'd talked on the phone, until they'd discussed the letter from his brother, gotten over the tiny pieces of the day. Nervously, almost childishly, she told him.

"I went to a fortuneteller today." She laughed then, embarrassed.

"Why'd you do that? I didn't think you believed in that sort of thing."

She begged, "Don't laugh at me. I just did it for fun. And I didn't tell her a thing. I remembered all the things you said that time we talked about fortunetelling at the Robinson's party. I didn't give her any clues or give her any help. I must have been the hardest client she ever had."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She said that sometime this year I'm going to have a baby."

"Well," he said, "she must not be a very good fortuneteller. That's not a prediction with much

statistical validity." His lips moved in an effort to smile; his eyes avoided hers. She knew he was trying to twist the pity, the terrible pity for her and for himself into humor or something else.

"Statistics aren't everything." She smiled at him. "She said she could see it in my hand. And by the time she was through talking to me, I began to see it too."

VITA

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